

## 20 Is God in the City?<sup>1</sup>

In an address at the 1978 Lambeth Conference of the bishops of the Anglican Communion, The Archbishop of York, Stuart Blanch (previously Bishop of Liverpool) told a story about a Church of Scotland minister who was moving to a new parish. On the eve of his move he overhears his small son saying his goodnight prayers: "Well, goodbye God, we're going to Glasgow." Is God there in a city such as Glasgow or Liverpool, or Pittsburgh or Birmingham? How are we to understand the city? Such an understanding involves theology as well as sociology, history, and economics. A theology of the city is both desirable and possible. It is desirable, because changing the world depends on understanding it – understanding it before God and understanding God's purpose for it. And it is possible, not least because there is a rich strand of material in the Bible concerning the city. That can help us to identify what might be called "theological middle axioms," which can be resources for people in their particular contexts as they seek to discover more precisely what the gospel is for them.

Like other themes, the city surfaces in the Bible in widely varying forms of material. These forms are not part of the Bible's throwaway wrapping; they are essential to what it is and to what it does. The Bible tells stories about the city, makes laws for the city, speaks of the city's future in prophecy and apocalypse, and brings the city into its praise and prayer. My concern here is to consider something of the significance of each of these.

### 1 Enoch: and Laws for the City

The Bible's first city is named after Adam's grandson Enoch (Gen 4:17). Cain has killed his brother and been sentenced to wander the earth as a fugitive. Away from Yahweh's presence, east of Eden in the land of Wandering, Cain marries a wife, they start a family, and Cain builds a city, which he names after his son. The city begins as a refuge from the insecurity of an open and hostile world. The city will in due course become a metaphor for community, but archaeological work in Palestine also draws attention to this more primary facet of its significance. The dominant architectural feature of the Israelite city is its walls. It is first and foremost a stronghold, a refuge from enemies (compare the way the metaphor is used in Pss 46 and 48).<sup>2</sup> But Cain's insecurity had been willed by God. The story of the city has an inauspicious beginning.

The end of the story in Gen 4 is also inauspicious. First there is the proud violence of Lamech, hinting at the fact that the city is a place where violence flourishes, not least family violence. Then we discover that while Cain is starting his family, Adam and Eve are rebuilding theirs. God gives them a son to replace Abel, and "at that time people began to call upon the name of Yahweh" (Gen 4:26). This has been seen as the beginning of the story of the Church, of the line of

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<sup>1</sup> First published as "The Bible in the City" in *Theology* 92 (1989): 5-15.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. F. S. Frick, *The City in Ancient Israel* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1977), p. 81. Illuminating broad background to the development and place of the city in the ancient world appears also in H. Frankfort, *The Birth of Civilization in the Near East* (reprinted Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor 1956), and L. Mumford, *The City in History* (reprinted Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1966).

redemption. This is the line in which Yahweh is active and known. The line of Cain stands for the world, sinful and under judgment, desperately seeking to shape a life without God; and the city is one of the devices whereby it attempts to do so.

But Gen 4:17-24 is more ambivalent about the city than that. It tells us that the development of the city is the context in which families grow (Enoch, Irad, Mehujael, Methushael, Lamech) before it is the context in which the God-given order of marriage becomes imperiled when Lamech takes two wives. The city is the context in which art and technology begin to develop (the invention of harp and flute, the forging of bronze and iron tools) even though the first recorded use of such discoveries is in the glorifying of human violence (in Lamech's proud verses about the execution of his wrath on an enemy) as the city becomes a place where vengeance has to be subjected to constraint, where the created order is imperiled and has to be protected.<sup>3</sup> There are of course huge differences between preindustrial cities and the vast cities of the industrial era, but also common features, and these include the fact that both facilitate the development of art and technology. They are thus the context where specialized activities and crafts evolve, though the underside of this latter is the emergence of a class structure in society. They are also the context where writing develops: if there had been no city, it seems there would have been no history, no theology, no science, no Bible.

The negative aspects to the city hinted in Gen 4 are also factors underlying the formulating of the Torah in Israel. It is therefore illuminating to consider the First Testament's regulations for the city in light of its stories about the city, and specifically to look at Deuteronomy, the most urban of the First Testament's bodies of instruction. In its literary context it is the teaching given to Israel on the edge of the promised land, and thus on the edge of life in an urban setting which Israel will share as it takes over Canaanite cities (cf. Deut 6:10) or builds its own towns. In the perspective of source-critical theory, the material in Deuteronomy belongs to urban Jerusalem. It reflects a more developed state than that of the regulations in Exodus and a more "everyday life" set of concerns than that of the priestly material represented by Leviticus, which may presuppose the collapse of urban life in Jerusalem in 587. There is also a possibility that much of the material in Deuteronomy was actually formulated in light of stories in Genesis, its stories about the city among them: they are instructions that safeguard against any repetition of unacceptable events in Genesis.<sup>4</sup>

There runs through Deuteronomy a series of concerns that are illuminated by the awareness that this is teaching for an urban culture.<sup>5</sup> First, it emphasize honesty and truth in society. There is to be no swindling of customers by merchants (Deut 25:13-16). There is to be machinery for handling tricky legal cases in a fair way (Deut 17:8-13). The same law is to apply to rich and poor. That is not how it feels to many inner-city people, particularly when race is factored in. Deuteronomy 19 includes a law to limit the taking of vengeance, by establishing places where a person guilty of accidental homicide may find refuge from the vengeance of his victim's family. Second, the teaching is concerned for the needy, in particular for groups whom we might call the underclass, the people who have

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<sup>3</sup> So W. Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: Knox, 1982), p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> So C. M. Carmichael, e.g., *The Laws of Deuteronomy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> I have analyzed these concerns in *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987/Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), chapter 5, though not in relation to the city.

fallen out of the regular support-systems of society. In Israel these comprise especially people who have no land by which to support themselves (we might see being without land as the Israelite equivalent to being without a job). They include Levites, widows, orphans, immigrants, poor people generally, and people whom debt has taken into servitude (e.g., Deut 14 - 15).

Connected with that, third, is Deuteronomy's stress on brotherhood.<sup>6</sup> When it seeks to motivate people to take action on behalf of those needy groups, it keeps reminding them that such people are their brothers (e.g., Deut 15). It reminds people in government not to forget that they are the brothers of those they govern (e.g., Deut 17:14-20). As an institution, the city combats the more "natural" division of humanity by families and clans: where people live now counts as much as to whom they are related. As Deuteronomy sees it, the community needs to be the family writ large. It might be saying retrospectively to Cain and Abel, "Come on, you're brothers." Fourthly, as if to anticipate the charge of being sexist in its stress on brotherhood, it adds a concern for womanhood. Its teaching repeatedly mentions attitudes to mothers, wives, and daughters, and their rights and responsibilities, as well as those of fathers, husbands, and sons (e.g., Deut 15; 18). It points to the fact that that women need protecting in the city. In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*,<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Engels traced the subjugation and oppression of women to the breakup of the communal kin group and the transformation of the nuclear family into the basic economic unit of society, because this turned women's work into a private service for their husbands. It was thus an urban phenomenon.

Related to this concern for womanhood in Deuteronomy, fifth, is a concern about family order and sexual relations (for example Deut 22). Sex easily goes wrong in the city. Sixth, and most strikingly, a recurrent theme in Deuteronomy is happiness. Only in Psalms and in Proverbs among the First Testament books does the verb "rejoice" occur more than it does in Deuteronomy. Its teaching keeps returning to the joy of festivals and the joy of food, and perhaps invites us to see the joys of the city as God-given and its unhappiness as to be fought in the name of the God of joy.

The reason why these ideals come to expression in Deuteronomy is that they are not actually embodied in Israel's urban life. Another noteworthy feature of Deuteronomy, given our present concern, is that it starts where society is. Its vision can seem insufficiently radical by the standards of some parts of both Testaments, but one reason is that in seeking to pull society towards ideals it ought to affirm, Deuteronomy manifests a practical concern that begins from society as it is in its sinfulness or "hard-heartedness" (Mark 10:5). Politics and social policy combine ideals and the art of the possible. Paul Wilding has protested at the notion of the "politics of imperfection," in the name of a politics of perfection, of possibilities, of vision, of transcendence.<sup>8</sup> Deuteronomy implies that we should both be realistic about how things and people are, but also be visionary about the ideals we affirm and then specific in the way we bring the two together. That is the vocation of society's lawmakers, economists, and planners. People concerned about the city often pay their respects to the First Testament by nodding towards the eighth century prophets, but the Deuteronomists provide at least as suggestive

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. chapter 12 above.

<sup>7</sup> Reprinted New York: International, 1942.

<sup>8</sup> "Christian Theology and the Politics of Imperfection," *The Modern Churchman* 27/2 (1985): 3-12.

a role model for practical involvement in society. If we as the Church want to play a part in the shaping of urban policy, we need to do that by nurturing the economists, lawyers, planners, and civil servants in our midst – in the midst of the suburban church more than of the inner-city church, in all likelihood. This is a key way for the suburbs to partner with the inner city with a view to seeking to implement the concerns of the prophets.

One further feature of Deuteronomy that deserves consideration is that it is not just a legal or ethical work but fundamentally a theological one, built on the fact that Israel is Yahweh's people and Yahweh is Israel's God. This, among other factors, underlies its concern about right and wrong forms of worship in the sanctuary that Yahweh chooses. In a culture in which palace and temple stood together at the apex of the city, this urban document could not ignore religious issues. It is easy for city and religion to be interwoven to the exclusion of God, a theme which also emerges in Genesis.

## 2 Babel: and a Vision for the City

Apart from the telling note in Gen 10:8-12 about Nimrod, the mighty warrior who was the great city-builder (which permits Jacques Ellul to observe how the city and war go together),<sup>9</sup> the Bible's second major city is Babel. People decide to settle in Shinar, which becomes "the cradle of urban civilization."<sup>10</sup> They build themselves a city there, with a tower that would reach to the heavens, so that they would not be scattered all over the world. Again the city is a refuge from the insecurity of an open world, and from the destiny willed for them by God. They were supposed to fill the world, and the previous chapter has described the scattering of peoples as part of humanity's filling the world after the flood; but these people resist that destiny. They want to stop in one place, and find a unity grounded in fear and excluding God, though not excluding religion. Indeed they seek to make use of religion, as a government may expect to use an established church, and as politicians do in the U.S.A. The city is a place to reach for heaven. There are echoes of the Babylonian ziggurat, and a reflection of the fact that a characteristic feature of a city is the presence of monumental buildings, which urban economics make possible. One aim of the whole project is for the builders to make a name for themselves: the phrase may sound negative, though it can be used in the First Testament in a positive way (see 2 Sam 8:13). The city represents human ambition and pride, which can be positive as well as negative attributes.

Again, it may be that we are to see this city as a monument to human creativity and inventiveness, as its builders work out how to use manufactured brick in the absence of natural stone.<sup>11</sup> Or it may be that Genesis speaks with some irony, because "brick" means mud shaped and dried in the sun, a common enough building material for private houses, but inferior to the stone hewn from a quarry which the story's hearers would know was preferred for important buildings. Further, the builders lacked proper cement and had to fix their mud bricks together with tar, so that their edifice must have been a little reminiscent of those 1960s apartment blocks that were the pride of the city as they were being built but turned out to be makeshift.<sup>12</sup> There is an ambiguity about Genesis's portrayal of

<sup>9</sup> *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1970), p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> C. Westermann, *Genesis 1 - 11* (Minneapolis: Augsburg/London: SPCK, 1984), p. 546.

<sup>12</sup> D. Kidner, *Genesis* (London: IVP/Downers Grove, IL: IVCF, 1967), p. 110.

the city, which perhaps corresponds to the ambiguity of Israel's experience of the city, and of ours.

Building a city was also a dangerous enterprise, as God saw it. "Who knows where else it may lead?" God asks. The city-builders threaten to become like gods. So those who were afraid of being scattered are scattered by God, and they give up building the city. It becomes a place of non-communication. One is reminded of the issues that nuclear weapons place before us as the human beings whom God has allowed to acquire the power to destroy ourselves, and who might be wise to invite God to come down and confuse their language again; and of the possibility that world peace and the success of the United Nations would more likely be demonic in effect than divine.

The scattering was an act of judgment, but it was one that opened up the possibility of God's own purpose being realized in the filling of the world rather than people stopping in one place.<sup>13</sup> The act of judgment plays a part in the implementing of God's vision for humanity. It thus points us toward the prophets and their vision of judgment on the city. There has been a longstanding debate about whether the prophet's calling was fundamentally to declare that inevitable calamity was about to fall upon Israel or whether it was to challenge Israel about its life and to call it to repentance so that calamity might be averted. In seeking to apply the Bible to their society, people naturally presuppose the second understanding, which looks more immediately promising, but the first is actually at least as plausible. The prophets were people who lived in the midst of calamity, in vision or in reality. Their vocation was to prepare people for calamity, to interpret it, and to respond to it.

They did not behave like social reformers. Historically, classical prophecy begins with the appearance of the Assyrians on Israel's northern horizon and with the need for Israel to discover what God was doing with the nation in this context. The first of the prophetic books opens by presupposing that disaster has overtaken the cities of Judah: Isaiah's aim is to try to explain it and to help Judah learn the lesson (see Isa 1). Prophets do call for repentance, but too hasty a desire to link them to programs for social reform may obscure their significance in a way that reduces their importance for us in the long term. Isaiah focuses on declaring to the people of God the fact and the significance of the judgment that hangs over their city. The city of David which became Yahweh's city, the holy city, is now the bloody city, and Isaiah declares that "Yahweh Armies has a day in store for all the proud and lofty, for all that is exalted...; for every high tower and every fortified wall" (Isa 2:12, 15). It is a warning rather than a program for reform.

A prophetic ministry involves drawing attention to facts and threats, to make it difficult for government or nation to ignore clouds that can be seen on the horizon. The task of propounding alternative policies, I have suggested above, is more the job of lawmakers and economists than of prophets. It is easy to take up a role that is half way between prophet and social reformer, and risk being less effective at either. Prophets took part in public debate by trying to make people face facts.

It might be wondered whether this prophetic ministry applies only to Israel and cannot be extended to the secular city; but another prophet was sent to tell a huge foreign city, a bloody city notorious for double-dealing, greed and aggressiveness, that it was about to be overturned (Jonah 3:1-3). He did not invite Nineveh to repent, but to his disgust it did so, and his awful fear was fulfilled. God

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<sup>13</sup> Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 99.

relented. "Am I not allowed to care about this great city with its hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left," he asks; "let alone the cows?" The story of Jonah suggests that pagan cities can be saved as well as Israelite ones, though they do need to repent, not just be reformed.

Nor does this approach apply only to individual cities. In Isa 24 there is a nightmarish portrayal of a ruined city that stands not for a particular place but for the world's urban civilization, high and lofty but defiled and desolated. It is a portrayal of a fortified town turned into a heap of rubble never to be rebuilt. Its memorial is those lifeless tells that scatter the Palestinian landscape, mute witnesses to the collapse of an urban civilization (cf. Isa 25:2; 26:5). The ruined city is a symbol of humanity under judgment. Nor is this perspective an exclusively First Testament one. Jesus denounced urbanized Galilee, Corazin, Bethsaida and lofty Capernaum, and declared God's woe on them, in the manner of a prophet. Unlike Nineveh, they were cities that failed to repent when confronted by his ministry (Matt 11:20-24). Near the end of the New Testament there is Revelation's terrible tirade against the great city of Babylon, the byword for trade, achievement, entertainment, civic pride, power, prosperity, craftsmanship, and culture. Here the city has also become the embodiment of demonic contempt for God and aggression against God's people, so that the proper stance in relation to the city is abandonment (Rev 18). "In order to have 'staying power' [for its mission to the city], the church must withdraw regularly 'into the desert,' to be free and detached from the city's power."<sup>14</sup>

Those negatives are not all there is to the Bible's vision for the city. Isaiah 1 closes with a transition from the city under judgment to the city transformed. Again, encouragingly, the judgment is itself the means of transformation. "Afterwards you will be called 'Justice City,' 'Faithful City'" (Isa 1:26). This Zion will be raised on high by God himself, not by human will. Such promises are to be spurs to human action (cf. Isa 2:5), but to demythologize them into merely veiled exhortations regarding what we are to achieve is a besetting temptation that Christian social activists must resist. They are promises of what God purposes to achieve, causing this Zion to attract the world as a place where it may discover the keys to truth and peace (Isa 2:2-4; a significant promise when the news from Jerusalem is persistently disheartening).

This hope for the city recurs throughout the Book of Isaiah (e.g., 26:1; 45:13; 52:1) and then reappears at the end of the Bible. Revelation's attack on Babylon is not its last word on the city. It closes with "the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God." The city is affirmed as a place of splendor, strength, community, provision, security, generosity, healing, and holiness, accessible to all as a place where God is known in glory and love and grace (Rev 21:1 - 22:5). Whereas the Bible began in a garden from which humanity was soon excluded, and might have been expected to conclude in the garden, it ends in the city, or in a place with the virtues of both, a garden city watered by a life-giving river and nurtured by fruiting trees. The city is one of a series of human devices such as sacrifice, monarchy, and temple, which are taken up by God, even though they did not arise from God's initiative, and are worked into God's purpose so graciously that we would not be able to conceive of worship or of Jesus or of the

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<sup>14</sup> D. S. Lim, "The City in the Bible," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 12 (1988), pp. 138-56 (p. 154).

fulfillment of God's final purpose without them. "Almost in line with contemporary urbanization, the Scriptures begin in a garden and end in a city."<sup>15</sup>

There are profound grounds for hope in this vision of the city, and the bringing of hope is a key aspect of the Church's calling, not least in the city, often a place of despair. It is a hope that does not derive from what we ourselves may be able to do but from what God is committed to doing, so that our actions are worthwhile because and insofar as they mesh with God's purpose. First Testament prophets and visionaries suggest that God has a dream for the city, so that the Church's calling is to declare in its preaching and in its life that there is reason for hope even when there is no scope for action and when justice looks utterly defeated. The Church's prophetic ministry involves not only making public proclamations about government policies (proclamations that can easily have a moralistic tone to them), but also telling the city that God has a vision for it and for us, which the most determined policies or neglects of governments will not frustrate. This takes us back once more to Genesis.

### 3 Sodom: and Prayer for the City

The Bible's third city is Sodom. On its first appearance, Sodom is characterized as a place of wickedness (Gen 13:13). Genesis 19 portrays Sodom as a perverted city, a place where society is sick, but it does not suggest that its sexual twistedness is its fundamental sickness. Sodom's wickedness is the subject of outcry to God (Gen 18:20-21; 19:13), and "outcry" is the word used of Abel's blood crying out from the ground to God (Gen 4:10) and of the Israelites crying out because of their suffering in Egypt (e.g., Exod 2:23; 3:7, 9; see also Isa 5:7; 42:2). This suggests that Sodom's wickedness consists in its being a place of oppression. That is in keeping with the rationale that Genesis gives for Yahweh's revealing to Abraham what is to happen to Sodom, that Abraham's vocation is to do with *sedaqah umishpat* (Gen 18:19), the exercise of power in a way that does right by the people in one's community, the classic double priority to which the prophets keep returning.<sup>16</sup> The oppression Sodom practices is also the aspect of its wickedness that is taken up when Judah is compared with the city of Sodom in Isa 1:10 and Ezek 16:46-50. Perhaps the reference is not to the affliction practiced by one citizen on another (otherwise it would not be the entire community that deserved to be judged); it is to the relationship that existed between the city and the surrounding countryside. In principle the relationship between city and country can be one of harmony and cooperation. The country provides the city with food, and the city provides the country with specialized services and manufactured goods.<sup>17</sup> But the city as a whole easily ends up being parasitic on the country, exacting tribute and taxes, attracting resources and wealth, and enjoying luxury and indulgence, while the countryside lives at a much lower standard.

God hears the plaintive, hurt lament of the people around Sodom and Gomorrah, and decides to discover if what they say is true, declaring the intention, if it is, to act in judgment on their behalf. But first, God listens to another cry, and

<sup>15</sup> B. Tonna, *A Gospel for the City* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982), p. 121.

<sup>16</sup> See J. P. Miranda, *Marx and the Bible* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1974/London: SCM, 1977), pp. 88-97; an chapter 16 above.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. R. R. Wilson, "The City in the Old Testament," in P. S. Hawkins (ed.), *Civitas: Religious Interpretations of the City* (Atlanta: Scholars 1986), pp. 3-13 (pp. 8-9).

responds to that. Indeed, he draws Abraham into crying out on behalf of Sodom, telling Abraham of the intention to act in judgment, then waiting, while two aides go to check things out there, to see if Abraham wants to say anything. There follows the extraordinary barter in which Abraham sees how far God would go in order to reprieve the city. Abraham is to be a means of blessing to the world (Gen 18:18); the way he puts that into effect is by praying for the world. At one level, Abraham's plea for Sodom may be seen as much as a discussion as a prayer, a tutorial on the subject of whether everything is predetermined or whether God is capable of acting in a different way from the one that seems inevitable. Will God let mercy triumph over deserve? The man or woman of God becomes a blessing to the city by praying for it, in the conviction that its destiny is open, even at the point where it looks most closed.<sup>18</sup>

Historically, praying the Psalms was a consistent part of Christian worship and devotion, but in the twentieth century it largely lost that place. In particular, the psalms of lament and protest largely disappeared from the church's worship. One way in which praying these makes sense is that many people in congregations need to be able to give expression to the hurts in their lives to God, but another is that people who do not have such hurts to express pray them for those who do, pray them as part of a suffering people. It is an aspect of weeping with those who weep, as in praying psalms of praise we rejoice with those who rejoice. Praying from the position of the people whose need we take into our heart is the way the Psalms go about intercession. And the pain, suffering and oppression the Psalms lament are often those of the city (compare also Lamentations). "Lord, swallow up, divide their speech, because I see violence and contention in the city. Day and night they go round it, on its walls. Harm and troublemaking are within it, destruction is within it. Injury and deceit do not leave its square" (Ps 55:9, 11 [10, 12]). The city is supposed to be a place of refuge, of safety, but it is not; so the Psalms challenge God to do something about that. Conversely, when the Psalms are rejoicing, it is often a joy in the city. The city is the gift of God (Ps 107:36). Jerusalem "is built as a city that is joined together to itself.... Ask for well-being for Jerusalem: 'May people be at ease who are dedicated to you'" (Ps 122:6). "If Yahweh himself does not guard a city, in vain will the guard have been wakeful" (Ps 127:1); the reminder appears in abbreviated form on the coat of arms of the City of Edinburgh (cf. also Ps 48). The Bible does not tell us to pray for the city; it shows us how to do so.

Prayer and praise are the vital accompaniment to story and law and prophecy. They are the distinctive gift that the Church alone can bring to the efforts of social and community workers, politicians, and civil servants, on behalf of the city. They are the Church exercising its indispensable ministry on behalf of the city. If it abandons these, it falls short at the crucial point; we are then simply activists alongside other activists who may fail because we neglect to lay hold on the resources for the city that lie in God. The Psalms do not point us toward the horizontal kind of prayer in which we exhort ourselves to play our part in bringing in the reign of God, nor even just the semi-vertical kind of prayer that asks God to enable us to fulfill our commitment to justice and peace, nor the kind of prayer that assumes God is real enough but is sitting in the gallery watching what goes on, keenly interested, but not active in the arena itself. The Psalms point us towards

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 1 - 11*, p. 291; Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 168; G. von Rad, *Genesis* (revised ed., London: SCM/Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), p. 209; and see further chapter 14 above.



the disinterested kind of prayer that begins from human helplessness and lays hold on divine mercy because that is all there is; at many points in the city that *is* all there is. They also point us towards the disinterested kind of praise that gives God the glory for the joys of the city and for the wonder of that new Jerusalem which is perhaps even now coming out of heaven from God.

I recall one All Saints Day, in the inner city church in England to which I belonged, realizing as we read the New Testament lection from Rev 7 that this little congregation formed a microcosm of the heavenly multitude that no one could number, of a kind that I had known nowhere else. It included Caucasian, Afro-Caribbean, and Asian people, babies, children, teenagers, young adults, middle-aged, and old, women and men, working-class, underclass, and middle-class people. The Church is called to be, and can sometimes be seen to be, a microcosm of heaven, an anticipatory embodiment of that new Jerusalem. The life of the Church is a key part of its proclamation. And it is when it is engaged in praise and prayer that it can most faithfully anticipate the heavenly city. That, too, is something we are responsible for, while being at the same time something God must bring about, so that we seek it from God.